

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission) Hearing

-NATO Enlargement and the Bucharest Summit - Macedonia's readiness to join NATO Ambassador Zoran Jolevski

Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for this opportunity to provide comment on the Republic of Macedonia's preparations and readiness to accept an invitation to join the NATO alliance.

In my country, I am proud to say that across a broad political and social spectrum, there is widespread support—make that enthusiasm—for joining NATO. Macedonia's odyssey to join NATO can be traced back to December 23, 1993. On that day, the Macedonian Assembly unanimously adopted a Declaration for accession of the Republic of Macedonia to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In June 2007, the Assembly reaffirmed the decision taken in 1993, and expressing the unanimous determination of all political entities in the country to fulfill all requirements for NATO membership as well as seek consent from our citizens to see the Republic of Macedonia become a NATO member. In short, our efforts to join NATO go back nearly 15 years and I have to say that some of those years—especially in the late 1990's and early 2000's proved to be very trying times for Macedonia.

It is a horrible irony that the last century began and ended with a war in the Balkans. We are still living with the aftermath of the last conflict. The recent decision by Kosovars to declare independence is just one of the legacies of that war.

It is a fair question to ask: "Why does Macedonia desire membership in NATO? On behalf of Macedonian citizens (who according to recent polls 90% of the country support joining the alliance) I would respond that we want to be part of the solution to peace, freedom and stability. Not just in our region, but wherever there is a threat to the Euro-Atlantic alliance. What binds the alliance together is not the concept of common defense. The glue that has made this the most successful instrument for peace the world has ever known is that each of the member states shares the same values. NATO membership is about shared values: Democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, religious and ethnic tolerance, and the rule of law. Why is this important? Because democracies do not resort to war or oppression and abuse when having to deal with internal or external problems. Freedom and democracy is a great buffer that allows for conflict to be resolved through peace rather than violence.

As NATO has expanded eastward it has served to broaden the sphere of peace because NATO cultivates democracies. Since 1999, 10 states have been admitted to the alliance. In April, all of Macedonia hopes that we will receive an invitation to join NATO.

Where we are now is a far cry from where we were just seven years ago. As ethnic tensions threatened to spill across our borders, Macedonians had a choice: We could either engage in a senseless civil war or join together and build a democracy. I am proud to say that Macedonians understood the terrible costs of conflict and instead dedicated themselves to building an ethnically diverse democracy.

With help from our European and U.S. colleagues and friends, the Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed that set us on our course for expanding minority rights, devolving political power from the capital to the local levels, and providing even more openings to the government and our military and security forces to ethnic minorities, though they have always been open. The Ohrid Agreement stands to this day as a model for fostering ethnic integration and strengthening democratic institutions through greater public participation.

The Republic of Macedonia has been a de facto part of the Alliance since 2002. Almost 4% of Macedonia's armed forces participate in NATO-led and other missions, such as ISAF,

Iraqi Freedom, Althea and UNIFIL. This participation has had two great benefits: The first being Macedonia demonstrating its ability to be a contributor to security, and secondly our forces are able to train and prove their ability to integrate with NATO units.

Macedonia has just completed its ninth MAP cycle and fulfilled the vast majority of the requirements arising from this process. Those remaining are technical in nature and we are committed to have those completed very soon. Militarily and from a security standpoint, you will find our forces very capable and have received extremely high marks from NATO for military restructuring. This has also been augmented by the Adriatic Charter that serves as a mechanism for Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia to exchange experiences, reforms and identify priorities and resources for regional security cooperation.

Macedonia is a religious mix of primarily the Macedonian Orthodox faith along with the Muslim faith as well as others. Our constitution guarantees religious freedom and people of all faiths live side-by-side. In September 2007, the Law on the Legal Status of Church, Religious Community and a Religious Group was adopted that brings us squarely in line with international standards. The Law incorporates the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief, especially with respect to the registration of churches, religious communities and/or religious groups.

A significant amount of budget resources have been allocated for the renovation of mosques, religious facilities and cultural monuments of non-majority communities. The government has also recognized several religious and community holidays important to our Albanian, Turkish, Serb, Bosnian, Roma, Vlach, and Jewish communities.

Our political reforms have been extensive and have built and expanded upon the Ohrid Agreement. One of the most important legislative accomplishments has been the Strategy on Equitable Representation. In 2007, the budget fund for this purpose was three and a half times higher than in 2006. Over 2500 ethnic Albanians and other non-majority group members were employed in public institutions in 2007.

Our electoral process has been transparent, free and fair. There is more to demonstrating freedom than just elections, and Macedonia enjoys a liberal media environment where freedom of speech is guaranteed, individual rights are respected and our judiciary is independent and dedicated to upholding justice and the rule of law.

My country is a signatory to all major human rights instruments in the UN and Council of Europe framework, including the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention against All form of Discrimination of Women, the Convention against Torture, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention against Racial Discrimination, the European Convention on Human Rights and all of its Protocols, the European Convention against Torture and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

A hallmark of any democratic state is the strength of its non-government organization (NGO) sector. Last year, the government adopted the Strategy for Cooperation with the Civil Sector that is a four-year program designed to provide an institutional framework for NGO cooperation between each other and helping link their efforts into government channels. As you know, NGOs can be excellent partners with government and also careful watchdogs protecting democratic rights and promoting institutional reforms.

Macedonia pays particular attention to the situation of Roma in our country. The legislators have adopted and implemented the Strategy and Action Plans the aim of which is to promote empowerment and integration of Roma to a greater extent into our society. Towards this end the government supports a number of projects on inclusion of Roma children in pre-school education and has opened eight Roma information centers throughout the country.

Macedonia continues to build its institutional capacity in the area of human rights. In this context it is worthwhile mentioning that in addition to the Permanent Parliamentary Survey Commission for the Protection of Freedoms and Rights of Citizens, the Committee for Inter-Community Relations and the Ombudsman, the commissions have been established to monitor human rights that include:

- The National Commission for Children;
- The Inter-Ministerial Commission for Human Rights; and
- The National Commission against Trafficking in Human Beings.

The substantial reforms within the judiciary have brought greater transparency, professionalism and efficiency to the judicial process. Enforcement records have also been improved. With the adoption of the Law on Public Prosecution and the Law on the Council of Public Prosecutors passed in December 2007, this package of laws, prepared in consultation with the EU bodies, has strengthened the independence of the judiciary and placed greater safeguards against any attempts at corrupting the judicial process. The establishment of the Judicial Council ensures complete independence in the selection and dismissal of judges, thereby insulating them from any political manipulation.

New amendments to the Criminal Code are incorporated in accordance with international conventions in the areas of terrorism, intellectual property, child pornography, cyber crime and trafficking in persons and minors. There is an ongoing implementation of the Strategy for Reforms of the Penal Law that will contribute to modernization of the system of criminal prosecution in accordance with European standards.

The Government is continuing its uncompromising fight against crime, with absolutely zero tolerance for corruption. The Government Program to Fight Against Corruption strengthened law enforcement and judicial capacity for fighting crime and corruption and raised public awareness. In the last Transparency International report, the Republic of Macedonia improved its standing in this regard by 21 places. We realize that our work in this area is far from finished. Corruption is an insidious disease that can cripple and destroy a democracy. We will continue to push for greater transparency and accountability in our civil service.

Macedonia's economy continues to gain strength. Last year saw GDP growth of more than 5% while the average inflation rate is 2.3%. We are striving to develop a robust economy built on a free-market system that takes advantage of the Macedonian peoples' tremendous creativity and provides opportunity to any person that wants to start a business. This is reflected in recognition by the World Bank that in 2007 ranked Macedonia 4th out of 178 countries for reforms in the business sector, important for improving the country's business climate. We are dedicated to continuing to this effort.

As the NATO Summit in Bucharest approaches, I hope, and my country hopes, that our dream for NATO membership will be realized. I think you will agree that we have made tremendous strides in reforming our military, economic and political sectors. Today, Macedonia stands ready to join the alliance as a fully integrated society in a region where we can serve as an example to others. We have met all the requirements for NATO membership and stand ready to join. NATO can take a historic decision and by admitting Macedonia and the other candidate states cement democratic reforms, expand the sphere of peace and strengthen further Euro-Atlantic security in what history has shown to be a volatile region of the world.

Thank You.